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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 000014

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: BAHRAIN'S RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL LEADERS CONDEMN
AL FAQIH'S CALL FOR PROTEST AGAINST SAUDI ARABIA

Classified by DCM Susan L. Ziadeh for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

11. (C) Bahrainis disregarded London-based Saudi dissident Dr. Saad Al Faqih's call for protests against the Saudi Arabian government following Friday prayers December 31. While police stood by, worshippers departed the Al Fateh Grand Mosque compound in a normal fashion. Al Faqih's appeal provoked a backlash of opposition from leading Bahrainis in the fields of religion, politics, and media. They sounded common themes of promoting unity, peaceful relations, and non-interference in internal affairs and condemned Al Faqih's move as evil. Bahrain's Salafis, presumably the target of Al Faqih's call, are influential in Bahrain due to their prominent position inside the parliament's Council of Representatives, and would only jeopardize their position by taking on Bahrain's largest, most important neighbor. End Summary.

They Gave a Protest and Nobody Came

12. (SBU) London-based Saudi dissident Dr. Saad Al Faqih's call for demonstrations against the Saudi government at Manama's Al Fateh Grand Mosque following Friday prayers went unanswered December 31. Al Faqih had urged Bahrainis to stage mass demonstrations against Saudi Arabia in broadcasts on the dissident's Al Islah satellite channel.

13. (C) RSO confirmed that the Interior Ministry deployed some 30 police officers to the Grand Mosque Friday to control any protests. Eyewitnesses reported that worshippers dispersed following the prayers in a normal fashion.

Imam Condemns Call As "Evil"

14. (SBU) Bahrain's religious and political leaders were united in condemning Al Faqih's call. Imam of the Grand Mosque Shaikh Adnan Al Qattan addressed the issue in his sermon, saying that the call was evil aimed at fomenting disorder, hostility and disputes among Muslim states. He said that Islamic values guide Muslims to observe good ties with neighbors, not intervene in others' internal affairs and to respect national sovereignty. He warned citizens against responding to the call, which could lead to serious consequences and harm the country's unity and please the enemies of Islam. He called on the security services to ban any demonstrations.

Politicians Warn Against Action

15. (SBU) Head of the Salafi political bloc Al Asala and Second Deputy Chairman of the parliament's lower house (Council of Representatives - COR) Shaikh Adel Al Moawda publicly condemned the call and said that demonstrations would harm unity in society and encourage the enemies of Islam to act against Muslims. Protests and rallies are not the proper way to bring about reforms, he added. Spokesperson for the Salafi bloc, Ghanem Al Boanain, stated that reform should be achieved gradually through peace rather than violence. He added that King Hamad set an example to be followed regarding reform, opening channels for dialogue and new ideas.

16. (SBU) President of (Muslim Brotherhood affiliated) Al Minbar National Islamic Society and head of the Minbar parliamentary bloc Dr. Salah Ali said that the call for protests contradicts Islamic teachings. He added that targeting Saudi Arabia crosses red lines and directly targets the security of the GCC. He continued that protests would increase the already existing pressure on Muslims at a time when "Islam is targeted." He urged Arab and Islamic governments to reach out to their citizens and open channels of communication on national issues.

Journalists Caution Against Interference

17. (U) Al Wasat newspaper Editor in Chief Mansour Al Jamri in a January 2 column rejected Al Faqih's call, describing it as unwise and unacceptable. He wrote, "our hope is that dialogue is reinforced between Gulf countries without the need to resort to incitement... We in Bahrain do not call on anybody in other countries to demonstrate on our behalf and we do not expect others to become involved in Bahrain's internal affairs." Akhbar Al Khaleej newspaper columnist Abdul Menem Ibrahim wrote, "the call of radical Saudis to demonstrate in Bahrain against Saudi Arabia was a call that revealed their true backwardness. They think that political freedoms in Bahrain give them the right to use Bahrain for their activities, but they are wrong. Democracy is not interfering in others' affairs or disrespecting brotherly relations with neighboring countries. Bahrain's democracy is for Bahrainis."

Comment

18. (C) Al Faqih presumably was appealing to Bahrain's Salafi community in his call for protests against Saudi Arabia. If he was expecting support, he badly miscalculated. Bahraini Salafis and other Sunni conservatives are doing quite well within the system, representing a well-entrenched group in the Council of Representatives. They would only jeopardize their position by supporting calls for interference in Saudi Arabia. Bahrain's Shia will always be suspicious of the intentions of Sunni fundamentalists. Other interest groups in Bahraini society, particularly the government and business community, are looking for ways to mend relations with the Saudi government following month-long tensions stemming from Saudi Arabia's implicit criticism of the U.S.-Bahrain free trade agreement. As a result, Al Faqih did not stand a chance.

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